Ask a Stupid Question

Bill Wattenburg

An unexpected answer from Dr. Teller to a not-so-trivial question helped Wattenburg gain the respect of his new A-Division coworkers.

The cubbyhole office was not exactly what I had expected as a new recruit for A Division in 1961. The wooden barracks were a far cry from my climate-controlled office and lab at Berkeley with a sweeping view of the central campus. When I had interviewed at the Lab a few months earlier, Sidney Fernbach received me in the new air-conditioned trailer complex that housed the world's biggest computers. I was overwhelmed by the STRETCH and LARC computers, and Sid Fernbach's ever gracious manner. I had signed up for the job on the spot.

I moved into my Livermore office on the hottest day of that summer and soon discovered that I had to keep moving or I would melt in my chair. My favorite cycle was a constant swing through the cool computer trailers and back to the drinking fountain in our barracks office building where the most stimulating conversations seemed to take place. During the first month, I tried to attach myself to several A-Division staff members who were working on interesting weapon designs. They were always willing to describe their ideas to me, but as soon as I opened my mouth with a stupid question, they wandered off. Then one day, a senior staff member who seldom spoke to me grabbed me by the arm and invited me to come along to a meeting with Edward Teller. An A-Division staff member was going to present a proposal for a new design. On the way to the meeting room across the street, my escort sternly admonished me: "Sonny, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. You might learn something." I was excited beyond belief to meet the famous Dr. Teller.

The presenter had just begun to lay out his design on the blackboard when Teller started asking some difficult questions. Those in the room seemed a little nervous, so I ventured a silly question of my own. The instant the words came out of my mouth, I wished I could cram them back in my stupid head. It was too late. Immediately, I heard a groan from the back of the room, "Now that's a really stupid question if I have ever heard one."

The stares from others in the room were boring into me in my chair. Teller closed his eyes for a moment. Surely, I thought, he was just being polite by pretending not to notice my embarrassment. But then he opened his eyes. "Indeed," he slowly replied, "to ordinary minds, that would seem to be a stupid question. But in fact, I don't think we know the answer. Does anyone here know the answer to the question? If not, maybe you should find out."

Now, I noticed others were squirming, and I remember thinking to myself, "Oh my God, now I have lost any chances to even stand next to these guys and listen in at the drinking fountain." But to my delight, two senior staff members asked me to join them in finding the answer that Teller had requested.

It took us several weeks of hard work. The results were not Earth-shaking, but fortunately for me, the answer to my stupid question was not trivial. Unfortunately, I also found a minor error in the design computations that they had presented that day. A senior A-Division guy who always seemed to be a bit grouchy suddenly warmed up to me a little. At one point, he sweetly commented, "You know you don't have to tell Dr. Teller about that. We've got it fixed up." I was also asked by others to double-check their computations at times.

Finally, I was beginning to feel accepted by the A-Division group.

Support on the Home Front

Jane Ellis

When Ellis learned her son Skip, an F-16 pilot, was being sent to Operation Desert Storm, her "Lab family" rallied to her side.

While I was working in the Office of the Associate Director for Engineering, our son Skip, who flew F-16s, was sent to Operation Desert Storm to serve our country. The day after I learned that he was flying to the Persian Gulf, I had to give a Compensation presentation to DOE.

This presentation was very important, but it was extremely difficult for me to get through it. I wanted to break into tears, thinking of our son flying F-16s in wartime. But Kathryn Craft-Rogers and Steve Yarbrough stayed with me that day, and they were so understanding and gave me so much support.

That, however, was only the beginning of support that I received. One day, the whole Engineering AD Office bought Operation Desert Storm shirts, and the next day the office went out to lunch proudly wearing these shirts. Many times, Roger Werne or Jens Mahler would stop by to see how Skip and I were doing. When Skip returned home, Paul Phelps suggested we invite him to the Lab to give a talk. Skip gave a wonderful presentation in Building 111, in a room packed with Lab friends.

The Beginning of the Bike Shop

Gordon B. Schultz and John Lafferty

In 1975, the Lab sent various work projects to a shelter workshop in Livermore for the developmentally disabled run by what was then called the Association for Retarded Citizens of Alameda County (ARC). Various projects were done at the workshop, such as collating copies or rebuilding camera lenses from Site 300.

At the same time, there was quite a bit of turmoil in the motor pool for the Laboratory. There were about 1,000 bicycles on site then, and the only people available to repair them were fully trained auto mechanics. As you can imagine, the auto mechanics were less than pleased with this arrangement.

Meanwhile, Jim Harris, who was in Procurement and knew of the shelter workshop and the work that was being done, was taking night classes. One of them happened to be a social service class. The subject came up of how to work with people with developmental disabilities, and a light went on in Jim's head. We had this problem at the Lab where we have to fix bicycles, we had a business relationship with the shelter workshop, and we had mechanics who are ready to go on strike. Let's see if something can happen. So a phone call was made to ARC, asking them, "Hey, can you fix bikes?" ARC's response was, "We have no idea, but if you have money, we'll try anything!"

This was totally new ground, not just for the Lab, but for almost the entire country. What the Lab made possible back in 1975 was unique. Just as the Lab's function is to do cutting-edge research, this opportunity for inclusion of developmentally disabled adults in the regular workforce was equally cutting-edge. You could probably count on one hand the number of agencies in the entire country back in 1975 that were thinking of taking people with developmental disabilities out of a shelter workshop setting and bringing them into the real work environment.

The Bike Shop started out with a supervisor and three bicycle mechanics, who worked three days a week, four hours a day. Within a month, it became obvious that this made sense, so they brought those mechanics and the supervisor up to full time. Then the program, very slowly over the years, expanded from there.

People at the Lab started to find out about what we were doing. Next thing you know, somebody from Computations called and said, "We've got this warehouse full of computer tapes where data were stored on 10-inch reels. Because of security reasons, we've got to erase those, and either dispose of them or reuse them." So a couple of people who had been in the Bike Shop went over to Computations. Slowly, other departments started to take on people. Then about 1985, my boss and I were trying to figure out how to expand. It finally dawned on us that having people work in Plant Engineering as gardeners or custodians would be perfect.

But we had our hands full figuring out how to integrate folks who, up to that point, had been trained to expect that they will spend their lives in a sheltered workshop. Everyone had the best of intentions, and probably for that time, it was the best plan. From about 1975 to the late 1980s, we had to spend as much effort undoing that sheltered existence training as we spent training people in how to do the work. But then, all of a sudden, you'd see the light go on in these folks, and then progress would happen. But you'd work for years to get to that point. The opportunity the Lab made for that kind of fundamental change to take place was profoundly important. It had huge significance, not only to people here, but in setting an example for the rest of the country.

Eventually the name of the group was changed, and now the group contracted out for the Lab is called Advancement and Independence for the Disabled through Employment (AID). Today, we have just under 30 people with various disabilities. They are spread out between the Bike Shop, Plant Engineering, Computation, office support, and mail delivery.

Probably the most striking thing that we've noted about our AID employees is that they would rather come to work than be on vacation. They look forward to coming to work the same as we look forward to weekends. We have to send them home when they're sick, because they know that we need them.

Bike shop employees repairing one of the roughly 900 bikes currently on site.